

Finding our way

Rev. Dr. Dwight Cook, Guest Contributor

The work of defining and creating community is a task that prevails across our global village. What does it mean to be in community? Who is in? What does it cost to be counted as a full participant? Who is out? Questions like these are already shaping life in a new millennium everywhere but maybe no place like Israel.

I went to Israel hoping to discover as much as I



could about how religious life impacts the political and social climate. What I saw as I landed in that place that for me holds so much history was, in fact, what can be seen the world over. It is the constant struggle of the sometime opposing forces of cultural trends vs. the sincere desire of a people to live out the true meaning of their religious life.

H. Richard Niebuhr refers to it in his work entitled *Christ And Culture*. In it Niebuhr challenges the Christian to discover in what way and to what degree Christ is relevant to the situation in which Christians must live.

The land of Israel is an immensely unique land with enormously complex issues facing the people as they seek to live out their own social ethic. I was caught by the attitude of those living in Israel, both religious and nonreligious, who sought to find a way to live with others and to peacefully coexist with integrity.

This is inevitably what it means to be in community in Israel: it means "finding a way." In each city visited there was a clear and distinct class system and for many of the young and middle-aged in that land their aim is to hold fast to a strong work ethic, and love for family. It is what matters most to them.

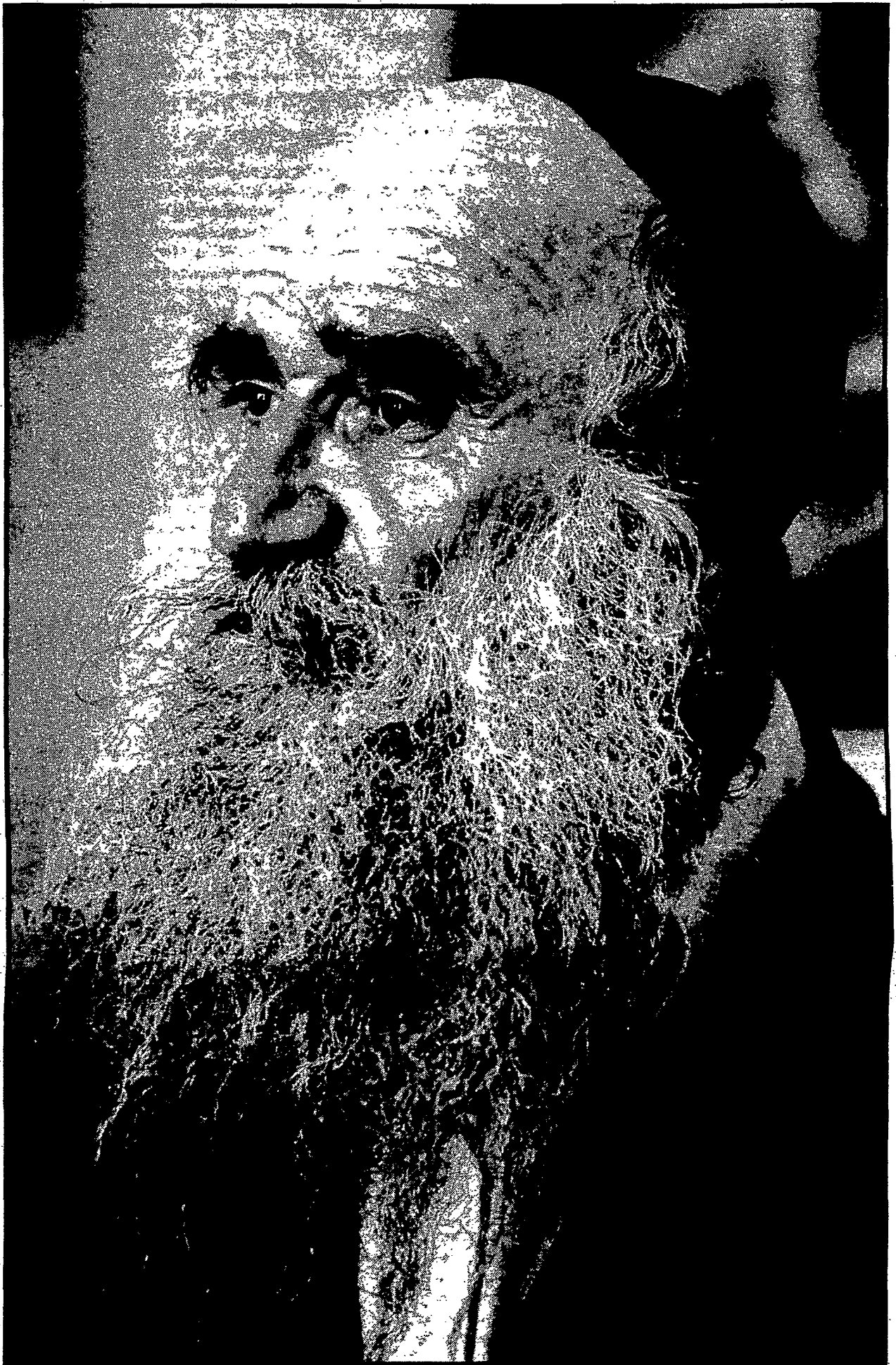
I discovered this as I met in a home of a very wonderful young Jewish couple living in a very new community just outside of Jerusalem. They had one young daughter, the husband was an attorney and the wife was a teacher at a public school. They were devoutly Jewish in lifestyle and thought, but did not attend a synagogue on a regular basis. For them to work hard to teach their daughter to be a good productive citizen was all that was truly necessary to be in community. For them religion was the problem and was creating most of the problems in their country. So their way of helping their community was to disengage from the practice of religion all together and to live a good decent hard working life as an example for their daughter.

I was awed by the ease at which this fine young couple could make such a decision and continue to maintain their place and status in the community. But what about others, what about new immigrants coming into Israel from places like Ethiopia? Will there be the same opportunity for them to climb the social, economic, and political ladder in Israel? Or will there be the creation of a new permanent underclass?

Most of all this encounter in Israel helped me to focus on the work of religious relations in my own community. The trip renewed my belief in my own work of reconstructing the common good that is based on theopraxis. I do not believe that one should have to deny one's heritage or history in order to be a part of any community. But I do believe that there is a way to establish democratic authority over the process of economic investment in the context of political freedom.

I return from this wonderful trip reaffirmed in the fact that God has made community possible — our work is to let it be so.

Rev. Cook is pastor of Mount Olive Baptist Church, Rochester and adjunct professor at Colgate Rochester Divinity School.



Yaacov Kaszemacher, a Jewish artist and art photographer, runs an art gallery in the ancient town of Safed, traditionally the mystical center of Israel.

Israel

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Interest grows

In greater Rochester there are higher levels of this understanding, according to Rabbi Katz.

"More people are at step two or step three than ever before — more knowledge, more contact, more sensitivity," the rabbi said.

Sister Nowak, for example, this fall is offering for the first time a class on the Holocaust. She reported the class received so much interest it could have been filled five times over.

"Obviously in the diocese things are happening, good things," she told fellow Christians and Jews on the interfaith mission. At the same time, she spoke of personal pain, because while so passionately pursuing acceptance of Jews by Christians, she said, "I get accused of leaving behind my church, my Christ, my faith."

Roman Catholicism has a tradition of repentance and confession, she said, yet it has had problems expressing this with its history of treatment of Jews. That treatment includes forced conversions, mass murder by Crusaders, passion plays heightening contempt of Jews, burning of their Talmud, and institutionalizing Jewish ghettos and

the wearing of distinctive clothing.

"Something deep within has made Judaism the demonized 'other,' from which we need to reform," she said. And that is what propelled her to begin a course in the Holocaust this fall, she said.

"The Holocaust is a Jewish tragedy but a Christian problem," she said. "For Christians it throws everything up into question. Theologically it puts everything on the line."

Joe Posner, a Rochester Jew affiliated with Temple B'rith Kodesh, said he didn't think any Jew feels secure in society today "because that's the way life has been, and what is there to say it is going to change? How do you get down to the root of each person? We are going to live with that insecurity a long time."

The Christians on the pilgrimage brought up his comment time and time again as one that especially touched them.

Still, Rabbi Katz said, "I really think there are different Israels that are being visited by the Christians. They relate well to the religious, to seeing the (Western) Wall and seeing that there is religion in the Wall, they can relate well to my celebrating Shabbat at a table with them ... But I don't think some relate well to the Holocaust and the suffering. I don't think some of the people relate well to Israel's excitement of the military triumphs.

"In thinking about it, I don't know if they have to or

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